

IN PRAISE OF OLD PEOPLE:
IN OUTRAGE AT THEIR
LONELINESS*

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I now live on a farm in Virginia. The neighboring place is owned by a real 19th century American family—four generations working the farm together. Every morning when I get up to care for my sick goat, I see members of this family walking down the road to the school bus, four males of various ages from 10 to 80. All four walk alike; all four dress alike; all four wear their hats pulled down so low that their ears are permanently bent in the middle—and no one in the area has any doubt about which family those people belong to. Recently the daughter had a baby boy. I immediately ran over to determine whether the bent ears were congenital, or if they developed from wearing hats.

I grew up in a family of that kind, in a small town where I knew my grandparents very well (better than I knew my parents), where I knew great aunts, where most of my friends had older people around all the time. It never occurred to me that things could be any different.

Until I went to college in Berkeley, Calif., I had never heard of children growing up without old people around or that such a thing as a homogeneous age group, a peer group, ever existed. Because my education was varied, unfortunately I did not enter college until 1964. I was involved with the free-speech movement, in which we invented the slogan, "Don't trust anybody over 30," and the "stop-the-draft week," at about the time most of my friends were beyond draft age.

After I left Berkeley, and even while I was there, I missed having old people around. I do not know why—it was just something I was used to. Some people like chocolate; I like old people. I had a lot of friends who were older. One woman with whom I used to play chess was 96; she won regularly. At one point she became ill and had to go

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into a nursing home in California—a posh, sterile, well-staffed, and thoroughly-inspected institution. While she was there I took care of her. I was horrified at what I saw there—not merely because of her, but because of what the institution signified about our entire society. I had always known that the elderly poor received a rough deal but I felt that this situation crossed age lines; if you were poor your age did not matter, you got a rough deal. This woman had an adequate income; she was a retired teacher with property. I found that if you are old, you can go to an expensive, nice place to be treated like a three-year old child at best, or at worst like a turnip.

I decided to travel and see if this was really one of the changes taking place throughout our society. I worked and traveled all over the United States, in various places—hospitals, nursing homes, pensioner hotels, mental hospitals, emergency rooms. I also spoke to people on the street. I just wandered around and talked to old people. Originally I had no intention of writing anything about my findings. But the more I saw, the more I thought: “I’m not getting any younger; I’m over 30 and nobody trusts me anymore and I’ve got to do something about it.”

So I decided to write a book. Everybody knows that the way we treat old people is scandalous. Since the first *President’s White House Conference on Aging* we have had reports which say, “Isn’t it awful?” People shake their heads and maybe, if it is an election year, Congress adds a little to Social Security benefits; if not, not even that is done. But I have seen no legislation that really attacks the basic problem, which is one of attitude.

You can find out about a society by studying what it takes for granted. One of the things that we accept without questioning is that old age is a second childhood, which is absurd. Traditionally, most societies have treated their old people as part of the community, if they could afford it. If the society was not affluent, old people were generally condemned to die early. But ours is a very affluent society, and yet we deny our older citizens any part of the abundance.

We deny it in various ways—not only by not letting them work and by isolating them but, and I hate to say this, by not respecting them. Some people think the greatest compliment you can give an older person is to say: “For your age, you look so young.” I think it is the worst thing you could possibly say to anyone. It is as bad as saying to a woman: “You think like a man.” Somebody once said that we treat

schizophrenia as if it were a thorazine-deficiency disease. I suggest that we treat old age as if it were a youth-deficiency disease.

There are many programs, many people working, and many national societies and organizations, but there is only one that I really like, the Gray Panthers. They are doing what I think has to be done to change the way we regard our old people. They are spitting in our eyes. The woman who founded the Panthers is interesting. It all began when she went to apply for her Social Security benefits and a social worker gave her a rough time. Happily, she had been a working woman all her life and was not willing to take that. So, with three friends she started the Gray Panthers, just to scare one social worker, and the newspapers picked up the story. That was the beginning of the Gray Panthers, which is the only way a group should begin.

First of all, any group that is going to make changes in the way we treat old people must consist mostly of and certainly be controlled by, old people themselves. I cannot do this; I do not even like being a spokesman for old people because I feel like a token. People will listen to me, perhaps, because I have written a book. I do not mind lending my voice, but I should like to see more old people forming their own organizations and changing things—organizing against the social-welfare system and all kinds of institutions. In our society people always think there is an institutional answer to everything.

But none of our institutions work—not one of them. Our schools do not work; our hospitals do not work. What do we have now? We have old people's homes all over the country, funded under all kinds of special-interest provisions of the Federal Housing Authority. In a recent scandal in California, old people were put in nursing homes by doctors who got "rakeoffs" on the side. It is obscene that old people are being used in this manner.

Simone de Beauvoir has said that old age is life's parody. That is true. The way we look at old age is the way society reflects back to the old persons what they are. They look like shadows, so we call them shadows of their former selves. We call them dirty old men. We use all kinds of labels for old people that do not have very much to do with human beings, with individuals and how they feel, work, and live.

There is one other problem. Merely providing for old age is an absurd idea. You cannot save enough money to provide for your old age and your children cannot save enough money to provide for your

old age. You get sick, and that is it for most middle- and lower-class families. If you have a lot of money you expect to be all right. But if your relatives have you declared mentally incompetent, they can take it away from you; then you are in the same mess as everybody else.

What has to be reintroduced into the lives of old people is passion. We say to old people: drop out, become uninvolved. This is a theory of disengagement which is really a theory of dispossession. If old people could restore their passion and teach us to be passionate and involved in our old age, it would be a great blessing.